Production Information

The first professional production of *The Mystery of Phyllis Wheatley* was February 1, 1976 at the Henry Street Settlement House in New York City. The production cast included:

PHYLLIS WHEATLEY	Marzetta Jones
LORD AFRICA	Norman M˙ Wilkerson, III
CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL	Edward Schiff
JOHN WHEATLEY	James Sherman
SUZANNH WHEATLEY	Terria Joseph
MARY WHEATLEY	Susan Sherman
JOHN PETERS	Jesse D˙ Goins
MUSICIANS:	Paul Hunkins
	Kalvert Nelson
	Marck Ben-Salahuddin
Director:	Elizabeth Van Dyke
Musical Director:	Paul Hunkins
Set and Light Design:	Bart Healy
Costume Design:	Susan Sudert
Choreography:	Frank Ashley
Stage Manager:	Robert Foose

CHARACTERS

PHYLLIS WHEATLEY	Black Poetess
LORD AFRICA	Spirit of African Liberation
JOHN PETERS	Phyllis' Husband
CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL	Symbol of Slave Trading Forces
JOHN WHEATLEY	Phyllis' Master
SUSANNAH WHEATLEY	John's Wife
MARY WHEATLEY	John's Daughter

NOTE: There should be three or four musicians playing off-stage, to carry the songs, dances and action; from time-to-time, some of the on-stage actors will play instruments.

Certain of the actors double-over and play bit parts, but it is obvious to all that they are doing this, and they should not completely drop their disguises of the principle characters they play.

Act

Lights rise slowly. Music is heard off, then comes closer.

It is a processional. African play. A drum, a and some other traditional and ordinary music makers.

The entire COMPANY enters. In the lead are LORD AFRICA and JOHN PETERS, dressed in ceremonial costume, carrying PHYLLIS WHEATLEY on a stretcher/like conveyance above heads, which is embellished with sacred and royal African symbols.

Next comes CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL in his special costume, a crimson robe like a Grand Dragon of the Klu Klux Klan, but instead of a hood, he has on an Uncle Sam hat.

Then JOHN WHEATLEY, SUSANNAH WHEATLEY and MARY WHEATLEY, who wear stiff, white military uniforms of colonial Africa, are next.

And bringing up the rear are the musicians in colorful dress.

The parade marches and dances about the stage. THEY play music and sing:

COMPANY

Phyllis
Phyllis
Phyllis Wheatley
A daughter of Africa
A princess of the King
Phyllis
Phyllis
Phyllis Wheatley
A child stolen from the tribe
A babe to land among alien things
Phyllis
Phyllis
Phyllis Wheatley
Your true name is lost
Your original family grieves
Phyllis
Phyllis
Phyllis Wheatley
How will you take the weight
How will you survive in this land of thieves
Phyllis
Phyllis
Phyllis Wheatley
Do you believe in tomorrow's fate
Do you know your sorrow will turn to song
Phyllis
Phyllis
Phyllis Wheatley
You are destined for fame
You won renown from those who did you wrong

(*LORD AFRICA and JOHN PETERS set PHYLLIS down upon a raised platform that is lighted to show off HER beautiful African gown. SHE looks as if SHE is slumbering, not dead.*

Upon an upbeat, THE COMPANY dances about PHYLLIS ritually, to the beat of drums, the shake of rattles, the clanging of bells and gongs, and the piercing shrill of whistles.

Finally, LORD AFRICA steps forward and speaks, halting THE COMPANY, which exits, as JOHN PETERS plays an African flute in the background. As LORD AFRICA speaks, the lights go down on PHYLLIS, making her disappear in shadows, as tropical sounds and exotic rhythms float in the scented jungle air.)

LORD AFRICA

Welcome . . . Welcome, friends. I am Lord Africa . . . spirit of all thing African . . . Ju Ju and jet black skin. Dancing maidens and pygmy priests preparing potions in the bush. Africa. Africa is made up of many things. Vast areas of land, huge mountains, strange gods, mighty rivers, wonderful and fearsome beasts . . .and numerous people . . . Yes, people that are a mystery in themselves because of the magic they lend to life. People like Kings, musicians, warriors, hunters of lions, builders of Pyramids, sorcerers, statesmen and poets. Phyllis Wheatley was an African . . .and a poet . . .but something strange and mysterious transformed her into a virtuous slave soon after she touched the shores of America.

(*The lights change. PHYLLIS' voice comes over the sound system, magnified; she recites:*)

PHYLLIS

(v˙o˙)

'Twas not long since I left my native shore,
The land of errors and Egyptian gloom;
Father of mercy! 'Twas thy gracious hand
Brought me in safety from those dark abodes.

(*Lights change back.*)

LORD AFRICA

Yes, a poet. But not very African sounding, heh? How did she get that way? How did a black girl born on the shores of

Senegal learn to compose verse like an English gentlewoman? And so totally reject her heritage and accept the myth of Cain and pray for her soul to be whitewashed in heaven . . .Ahhh . . . this is a story that must be told. It is a story that I have come to tell. It is a story that needs to be known. So be it! Roll back the curtain of history. Pull away the veils of the past. Let the story of Phyllis Wheatley unfold. Our Phyllis. . . a mystery in America . . .but we shall know soon . . .for the play has begun!

(*There is an explosion and a belch of fire and smoke. Lights on PHYLLIS, showing her on the stretcher.*

LORD AFRICA waves a magic wisk over PHYLLIS and sings. THE COMPANY and MUSICIANS help him from the wings, The drums beat heavily.)

LORD AFRICA
Rise up
Rise up
Rise up
Rise up, oh gifted one
Rise up and show the world
the genius that is yours
Rise up and let them know
the gifts that come from
these bright Africa shores
Rise up, Phyllis, and take
your place
A dark little girl that
casts a glow over history

Rise up and endure
Rise up and be sure
your life will not have been
spent in vain
Though there is hardship, pain
strife and uncertainty,
You will make your mark
and your song will not be a dirge
in this cold land, America
So rise up
Rise up
Rise up
and be heard!

(*PHYLLIS rises to the cries and wails and drum beating and dancing, as if SHE is a corpse rising from the grave.*

The lights change and LORD AFRICA dances off into the shadows.)

PHYLLIS

(*Comes forward and speaks in a little girl's voice.*)

I was taken from my native shores in the warm land of Senegal, Africa, when I was a child of seven.

(*CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL enters. HE is sly, evil, cruel and powerful. In truth, CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL is the symbol of the universal slave trading forces.*)

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

(*Spies young PHYLLIS rubs his hands together.*)

Aha! A young African girl alone. I will steal her and take her to America. There I will sell her and get money so that I can buy rum and machinery that I can trade around the world. But she is the most important item now. She is precious flesh and bone and skin; she is black gold. I must have her, and make her my property.

PHYLLIS

(*looks out front*)

The ocean is so blue, like the sky that covers all. What is across the wide waters? What is the world made of? How could I ever see all that I dream of?

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

(*Stealthily approached PHYLLIS and confronts her.*)

Because I shall grant you your wishes.

PHYLLIS

Oh! You frightened me!

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

Don't be afraid, little one. I am Captain Diabolical. I have been sent here to make your life complete and fulfill your every dream.

PHYLLIS

But how can you do that?

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

I shall rescue you from ignorance and savagery.

PHYLLIS

But I am not ignorant nor a savage. I am a child of Senegal, an empire which stretches farther than a man can walk in a month's time. In this land we have universities, doctors, riches, crocodiles and yum yum trees.

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

Yum Yum trees?

(*PHYLLIS sings to CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL.*)

PHYLLIS
In Senegal
we have
Yum Yum trees
and all
the delights
are free
We live in style
love one another
and have no fear
in these so-called
wilds
I'm an African
girl
In the whole
wide wide sea
there's no pearl
more precious
than me
Welcome stranger
you're our guest
treat us right
and you'll
get our best
You'll get hospitality
You'll get friendship
all for free
for now you
stand in the
Land of Yum Yum trees.

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

Yum Yum trees? But where I will take you the very land is a delicious feast. Flap jacks grow on bushes and honey and molasses run in glistening streams of sweetness.

PHYLLIS

Oh, go on with you, Captain Diabolical. I told you that nobody around here was dumb. I don't believe you. And I think you're bad.

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

Since you are so hardheaded, little princess, then I'll switch to my plan B˙

PHYLLIS

Plan B? What's that?

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

It's this, little one. The plan where I 'bop' you on the head and steal you.

(*Grabs PHYLLIS, bops her on the head and pulls her off.*)

(*LORD AFRICA enters and looks after them.*)

PHYLLIS

(*off*)

Help! Help! Save me! Save me from a fate worse than death!

LORD AFRICA

It is too late. She's gone. The forces of evil have our little one.

(*Music rises. The band plays a lament and LORD AFRICA dances sadly until he drops his head, and the lights go down.*

Lights up.

The bodies of the actors simulate a slave-trading vessel. In the hole, is PHYLLIS, bound and chained; upon deck, LORD AFRICA and JOHN PETERS are rowing.)

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

(*Stands above them, cracking his whip.*)

Heave to, me hearties! We're bound for the shores of the promised land.

LORD AFRICA

It holds no promise for us, you fiend. We are slaves.

JOHN PETERS

(*chorus*)

Yes, slaves.

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

Pull! Pull! Throw your backs into it. We head for the coast of America.

LORD AFRICA

Turn back, Captain Diabolical. Turn back before it is too late.

JOHN PETERS

(*chorus*)

Yes, turn back.

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

Turn back? Never! I have my cargo. My hold is heavy with black gold.

JOHN PETERS

(*chorus*)

Black gold.

LORD AFRICA

What you seek from Africa will destroy you, evil man. What you steal you lose in turn.

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

What I steal I lose? . . .How silly you all sound . . .Ha ha ha.

LORD AFRICA

Yes! For when you steal humanity, you lose your humanity.

JOHN PETERS

(*chorus*)

You lose, Captain Diabolical. You lose!

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

I lose? Now do I really lose, seeing your muscles carrying me across the sea? And your precious treasure is now my treasure that I own. Stop this nonsense about my losses. I am King of the Universe now. I drained the Gold Coast . . .Heeee ha ha ha ha I sucked the Sudan dry. I own Egypt. I gave you Tarzan. I am Africa! Heeee ha ha ha . . .

LORD AFRICA

No, evil one. You will rule shortly then fall. Your greed will betray you. And then the people will rise and save our homeland, Africa.

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

But in the meantime we have a long way to go. So row, row, me hearties! Row as if your lives depended upon it, because it does. Ha ha . . . listen to my whip crack and bend your backs into your task. Heave! Heave! To America we go. To the seat of democracy and human rights. Pull! Pull! Pull!

(*Lights down*)

(*Lights up and on PHYLLIS in center stage. SHE is chained and shackled but stands.*)

PHYLLIS

(*eight years old*)

I am a slave. A slave. A captive. Someone's property to be bought and sold and disposed of for profit. What a fearsome fate. How wretched can an existence be? How will I survive? How can I stand this?

(*LORD AFRICA has entered, but stands to the side.*)

LORD AFRICA

Use your mind, child. Use the genius that has been given you to escape this cruel prison.

PHYLLIS

(*as if hearing a voice*)

What can I do? What? . . .use my mind? Yes. That's it. I'll use my mind to the best of my ability and succeed in that terrible, cold place, America. No matter how harsh the future is, I'll triumph. I'll not fail. The light of intelligence will be a searchlight which will lead me through the gloomy slave future. Mark my words. All the world will know that name that I shall soon bear. For my words shall ring down through history.

LORD AFRICA

And may they ring like a clear bell.

(*PHYLLIS sings.*)

PHYLLIS
There's a country
hereabouts
where you can escape
the fate of being a slave
There's a region
that few
know its
whereabouts
but within its
borders you'll
surely know how

to behave
Raise anchor
Cast off
'cause we're
heading for
the Kingdom
of the Mind
Yes, the
Kingdom of
the Mind
Where all
wishes can
be created
Where each
desire is
abated
Don't be
left behind
not everyday
do you have
the chance
to enter the
Kingdom of
the Mind

Shove off
Hit the
road
Batten down the
hatch
we're on
our way
To the Kingdom
of the Mind
That's right
The Kingdom of
the Mind

(*the lights alter, a voice comes from off-stage:*)

JOHN PETERS

(*off*)

The mind is fine, my dear, but don't forget your flesh and blood will one day belong to me.

PHYLLIS

(*worried*)

What? Who's that? Another slave master?

JOHN PETERS

(*Enters and a soft light shows him to be youthful and handsome.*)

The mind is fine, but don't forget me. Hey . . .it's me! Your husband-to-be, John Peters.

PHYLLIS

(*with accent*)

Juahn . . .Piiettres?

JOHN PETERS

Don't worry, my darling. You'll be able to say my name soon when you learn English.

PHYLLIS

All this is so strange . . . I . . . I don't think I understand.

JOHN PETERS

(*fades away*)

The mind is fine, but your everything is mine. I'll see you soon, my love. Remember . . .I am your husband to be . . . in America . . . America. . .

PHYLLIS

(*to audience*)

We're really getting on with our story, aren't we? I'm to have a husband one day . . .but first I will learn

English . . .after I am sold. Ohhh . . . my John looks just like the son of an African King.

(*Lights down. Up on a slave auction in Boston.*

PHYLLIS is on the auction block. LORD AFRICA and JOHN PETERS, their chests bare, wait their turns, manacled and chained.)

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

(*as auctioneer*)

What price do I hear for this fine, young African negress. she was a princess in her homeland. . she'll be a fine lady's maid . . .or children's nurse. What do ya bid?

LORD AFRICA

It is inhuman to sell humans.

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

Shut up, you there, before I beat you senseless.

JOHN PETERS

It is inhuman to sell humans.

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

Watch your tongue! You're slaves, or did you forget? I own you. You're not allowed to talk unless I permit you. Do you want to die?

LORD AFRICA

(*sings*)

It is inhuman to sell humans.
It is not right to cause your black
brothers this plight.
It is inhuman not to be human.
Fight this blot against life!
Don't you see the shadow this places
upon your soul?
Not a drop of human kindness can you
claim for this sin.
Not a leaf of redemption will you
receive from the Book of Life.
You are doomed for your crimes against
humanity.
You will pay for this day that you sold
our African flesh.
It is inhuman to sell humans.
What an evil plot!
And this will bring you to your hateful
end.
CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

Enough of this! Enough of this! There's dollars to make today. There's people to sell. If you think I'm not going to make a fortune now and change my ways, heck, you must not be well!

JOHN PETERS

Heck, he must not be well, selling us like we're animals.

(*The WHEATLEY FAMILY enters.*)

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

(*Sees them and begins his spiel.*)

Bid em in! Bid em in! What am I offered for this beautiful Senegalese princess? She's straight from the court of the King of Benin. Yes sis! Walked the halls of Timbuctoo, she did. Give me a price. C'mon, give me a price for a princess.

(*Lights Change*)

LORD AFRICA

(*Steps forward into a colored spotlight, as others freeze in tableau.*)

It has been written that in the 1761, a slave girl was put up for sale in Boston slave market. Susannah, the wife of John Wheatley, a prosperous tailor, wanted a black girl to train as a domestic, although the Wheatleys already owned several household slaves. There, on the block, was this African child, "of a slender frame, and evidently suffering from a change of climate."

(*Lights change. The action resumes.*)

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

Bid em in! Bid em in, folks!

JOHN WHEATLEY

Ah, here we are. I told you they would still have some slaves left if we hurried, Susannah.

SUSANNAH

Oh, I didn't want to come, John. You could have done it all. You know how I hate this cruel, inhuman spectacle. And it's making Mary ill.

MARY

I'm sick. I want to go home, daddy. It smells bad here.

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

Smells bad? Ha ha ha . . .it's only the odor of death. This is a well-kept slave market. We're government licensed and approved.

JOHN WHEATLEY

Now Mary and Susannah. You both know that a companion for you would be delightful. Right? So I brought you along so that you could choose. How would it be it I made a bad choice? We would have to live with it, right? Ha ha ha.

MARY

Oh, daddy. Let's go home.

SUSANNAH

Let's make our choice and go, John.

JOHN WHEATLEY

Well, they only have one selection today, as far as I can see.

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

What am I bid for this comely maiden. State your price.

MARY

Oh, she's' shedding her front teeth.

SUSANNAH

She's a child, Mary. She'll grow a new set. But she does look nice . . .Only she's so fragile.

JOHN WHEATLEY

She's not going to be doing field work, my dear.

SUSANNAH

(*to the audience*)

That is true. She will not lead a life devoted to menial occupations. Nor will she associate with our other domestics, even though she is of their own color and condition. She will be of our making, my own protegee.

MARY

Oh, daddy, she is nice. She's smiling at me. I like her. Let's take her, daddy. Let's take her.

JOHN WHEATLEY

If you think so, Mary. What do you think, Susannah?

SUSANNAH

Well, if you both say so.

MARY

I want her. I want her.

JOHN WHEATLEY

Do you really, dear?

MARY

Yes, I do. I want her. Can't I have her, daddy? Can't I have her?

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

Bid em in! Bid em in! Give me a price!

(*Lights Change*)

LORD AFRICA

And the little slave was sold into the Wheatley household.

(*In the dim light PHYLLIS mounts the back of JOHN PETERS, piggyback style, and he half carries, half-crawls about the stage with her.*)

LORD AFRICA

Records say that "her anxious mistress, fearful of the effects of cold and damp upon her already delicate health, ordered Prince (also an African and a slave) to take the chaise, and bring home her protegee. When the chaise returned, the good lady drew near the window, as it approached the house, and exclaimed . . ."

SUSANNAH

"Do but look at the saucy varlet!" . . .

MARY

Of course, varlet, is a colonial word that means servant . . .

LORD AFRICA

And it is reported that the lady of the house said . . .

SUSANNAH

"If he hasn't . . ."

MARY

Meaning Prince, our slave . . .

SUSANNAH

". . .If he hasn't the impudence to sit upon the same seat with, my very own protegee that I just bought. What are varlets coming to these days?"

(*Lights down on PHYLLIS and her mount, as THEY go off.*)

LORD AFRICA

And then they named the woman child they had bought.

(*Lights on PHYLLIS and the WHEATLEY FAMILY.*)

MARY

Now that we have her, what shall we name her, mommy and daddy?

PHYLLIS

History knows me as PHILLIS . . .Perhaps that name will do.

SUSANNAH

The choice is up to you, Mary.

PHYLLIS

Phyllis is my slave name.

MARY

She keeps talking to us in her own language. I do not understand African.

SUSANNAH

It doesn't matter, my dear. She'll learn our language soon. And the name you give her will be what the world will know her as.

JOHN WHEATLEY

Yes, name her what you will, Mary.

PHYLLIS

Name me Phyllis.

MARY

(*inspired*)

I think I know . . .

JOHN WHEATLEY

Yes.

SUSANNAH

Yes.

MARY

It's becoming clear to me.

JOHN WHEATLEY

Yes.

SUSANNAH

Yes.

PHYLLIS

Yes.

MARY

I will name her Phyllis.

SUSANNAH/JOHN

(*together*)

Phyllis Wheatley . . .that's a good name!

PHYLLIS

It's about time.

(*Lights off of them.*)

LORD AFRICA

. . .And after she was given a name and taken into the household, Phyllis was taught to read and speak English. And she learned very quickly.

(*Light on CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL.*)

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

Teach a slave to read! It is treasonous. Slaves should not be taught how to read, write, vote, think or anything else that will have them believing that they are better than slaves. Do you want them to find their way back to Africa? Do you want them to discover the truth? That they are human beings who should be as free as the most free of men. What if they overthrow our slave system? What if they bring freedom, democracy and liberty to everyone? Oh horrors, horrors, horrors . . .

(*Lights off CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL.*)

(*MARY and PHYLLIS are in the WHEATLEY'S sitting room.*)

PHYLLIS

(*reads*)

"So when the messengers came to Lot's followers, He said: Surely you are an unknown people. They said: Nay, we have come to thee with that about which they disputed. And we have come to thee with the truth, and we are surely truthful. So travel with thy followers for a part of the night and thyself follow

their rear; and let not any one of you turn round, and go whither you are commanded. And we made known to him this decree, that the roots of these should be cut off in the morning. And the people of the town came rejoicing. He said: These are my guests, so disgrace me not . . ."

MARY

Phyllis, oh, you read so wonderfully. I can't even understand some of those books of yours. And just to think, only a short while ago, not knowing anything of our ways or tongue. . .

PHYLLIS

Yes, Mistress Mary, I have been very blessed.

MARY

Please, say Mary, don't call me mistress. I'm your friend.

PHYLLIS

And you also are my owner. Remember, I am a slave. Your family bought me. The other slave holders here-abouts would not stand for my not acting as a slave has been decreed to act.

MARY

But you are in our home, Phyllis. Under our protection. And you are not a slave. At least we don't treat you as one. . You are part of our family. And I'll not have it any other way.

PHYLLIS

Please yourself, Mary. But do me a favor, when we are among other people, allow me to act the part of a slave. I don't wish to get you and your parents or myself in trouble.

MARY

Phyllis, it's not as bad as you paint it. This is Boston.

PHYLLIS

Whether it's Boston or Alabama, my people, the black people are not treated right.

MARY

But all of us are not terrible slave-trading monsters.

PHYLLIS

Yes, that's right. You all aren't monsters. But your family bought me as if I were a cow or a mule, just the same.

MARY

Oh, Phyllis, dear. Can't I make you see that some of us are different?

PHYLLIS

(sings)

If I paint the scene as dark
as myself
It doesn't mean I'm being mean
If I tell the truth and explain
the facts
It doesn't mean I'm being mean
If I accuse your fellowmen for their
greed and cruelty
It doesn't mean I'm being mean
If I suffer from your sins
and cannot offer you a grin
It doesn't mean I being mean at all.

(*PHYLLIS acknowledges MARY, and she replies:*)

MARY

(sings)

When I took you for my friend
I hoped you to be my sister
to the end
When I shared my life with you
like myself I knew you'd be true
It wasn't our world to make or unmake
we're small small women
man's delights
and like females of our times
we take and take
And even life is sometimes filled
by harshness and fright
When I took you for my friend
Sister Phyllis, I knew then
it was all right
So I'll paint my picture clear
I've found someone dear
a friend such as you
Black and beautiful and true.

(*The GIRLS dance a dance of friendship. Then the lights go down on them.*)

(*Light up on LORD AFRICA.*)

LORD AFRICA

Soon the Wheatley's had done a good missionary job on Phyllis. For her, the African memory in her mind became a pagan inferno, and like the virtuous slave that she was, she was thankful for being out of the Dark Continent, and thankful to be a slave in a good christian household.

(*Light on PHYLLIS, praying upon her knees.*)

PHYLLIS

(*prays*)

Oh, thank you, my new found God, for making me lucky enough to have humane masters. Oh, thank you, my recent Saviour, for snatching me from heathen Africa. And I thank you once more, my Lord of late, for saving me for your own heavenly flock which I will join as soon as my sentence as a slave is completed here upon earth.

LORD AFRICA

And at least some of her prayers were answered. Phyllis Wheatley became the first black, the first slave and only the second woman to publish a book of poems in the brand new United States. She was truly the first American poet. But was there more to Phyllis than met the eye? Ahhh . . .now there lies the mystery.

(*As PHYLLIS prays upon her knees, JOHN PETERS appears in a dim, unnatural light, as if in a dream.*)

JOHN PETERS

(*gently*)

Phyllis . . .Phyllis, my wife to be. Rise from your knees. There is no reason for you to act like a slave in the privacy of your bedroom.

PHYLLIS

(*startled*)

Oh! Who's that? Oh . . .it's you, the African prince. You know, I had almost forgotten about you.

JOHN PETERS

Yes, you have almost forgotten a lot of things. Our homeland, Africa . . .and how warm and beautiful and nice it was there.

PHYLLIS

No. I didn't forget my beautiful Africa. It's just so cold here, and I couldn't get out . . .so I pretend to know nothing of my wonderful home.

JOHN PETERS

And did you forget your mother . . . and how she "poured out water before the sun at his rising" each day for you?

PHYLLIS

Oh, please, don't make me remember too much and become sad and sick.

JOHN PETERS

And have you almost forgotten who you were before you became Phyllis Wheatley? When you danced in the moon beams on African beaches?

PHYLLIS

Please . . .don't embarrass me.

JOHN PETERS

It is just as well you forget for now. We are captives here. And our minds protect us in many ways. Forgetting is fine protection for some, my precious Phyllis.

PHYLLIS

Precious? Yes, you once said that you were going to marry me one day. When will that be, my-husband-to-be?

JOHN PETERS

One day. Now you're only fifteen, so we have to wait a while. You haven't even met me yet.

PHYLLIS

That's too bad, isn't it?

JOHN PETERS

But we will meet one day. And soon you will be famous and celebrated.

PHYLLIS

(*pleased*)

I will? How wonderful.

JOHN PETERS

Your black voice will be a small dark song in the Christian white wilderness of this new nation, crying out for deliverance from bondage.

PHYLLIS

You use words so well.

JOHN PETERS

Thank you. Yes, one day I shall reach prominence through pleading the cause of the enslaved black race.

PHYLLIS

But will all this come about?

JOHN PETERS

All of that and more, Phyllis. But, remember, use your mind, your intelligence and graciousness to overcome the evils that await you.

(*JOHN PETERS begins dimming out.*)

PHYLLIS

Yes. Yes. I hear you, my-husband-to-be. But why are you going?

JOHN PETERS

It's as it has to be for now. Come kiss me before I am gone, so that you'll remember me until I see you again.

(*SHE goes to him and THEY embrace and kiss, then she backs off from him. HE disappears in darkness. SHE sinks to her knees again.*)

PHYLLIS

(*as if awakening*)

Oh . . . what a wonderful dream! I feel so fresh and alive. I believe that I'll spend the balance of my evening creating poetry.

(*Lights Down*)

(*Lights up on THE WHEATLEY FAMILY.*)

JOHN WHEATLEY

I dare say that Phyllis has been one of the best investments that I've ever made. She is so famous now that scores of people come to my shop, just so that they can say that they've met Phyllis Wheatley's master.

SUSANNAH

Everyone is marveling at her. I am so proud and wonderfully happy. Do you know . . .the well-to-do people are even saying that I am a gifted missionary and enlightened teacher.

MARY

You are, mama. Phyllis is your very own protegee . . . and she has performed beyond our wildest dreams.

JOHN WHEATLEY

Yes. Yes. The whole of Boston is talking about us, I mean, Phyllis. It's truly a blessing. For business as well as our standing in the community.

SUSANNAH

To have a celebrity in the household, even though a slave. Oh, we are so fortunate.

MARY

Yes, to have a celebrity to rub shoulders with each day and call her your very special friend. She's not like a slave at all.

JOHN WHEATLEY

Celebrities are never slave-like, Mary. They are regal, important, bigger-than-life.

SUSANNAH

And we have our very own. Right in the next room. She's probably praying now, reading Holy Writ and writing her first poems for publication.

THE WHEATLEYS

(they sing)

We're hot shots
because we got
a big shot
on our team
Yea team
Yea team
Yea team
We're the real McCoys
above the hoi polloi
and on the beam
Yea team

Yea team
Yea team
We have a celebrity
in our house
someone who is dainty
as a mouse
she doesn't scream and shout
Yea team
Yea team
Yea team

Our investment paid off
our ship came in
we got a superslave
and we don't feel any sin
Yea team
Yea team
Yea team
We got to win
We got to win

(*Lights down on THE WHEATLEYS.*)

(*Lights up on LORD AFRICA.*)

LORD AFRICA

And Phyllis' first published poem burst upon the world.

(*Lights up on PHYLLIS.*)

PHYLLIS
Take him, ye Africans, he longs for you,
Impartial Saviour is his title due Wash'd
in the fountain of redeeming blood, You
shall be sons, and kings, and priest to God.

(*Lights down on PHYLLIS.*)

LORD AFRICA

It was poem in memory of the Reverend George Whitefield who breathed his last at Newburyport, Massachusetts in September 1770. To many blacks, Whitefield, although he did not preach for the halt of the slave trade, was a friend to the slaves.

(*In an explosive flash of fire and smoke. CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL appears.*)

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

Enough of this! Enough of this . . .this poetry!

LORD AFRICA

What do you want around here, Captain Diabolical? Haven't you done your evil best? You stole Phyllis, you enslaved her . . .

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

I haven't even begun to make that little woman's life horrible. Her poems, her religious prayers, her sweet and humble ways . . .I hate and despise them.

LORD AFRICA

You fiendish fiend!

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

Call me what you will, Lord Africa, but you haven't any power to stop me. Didn't I come to your land and take your people? Don't I do what I want here in my own land, America? You are powerless . . . you weak story teller.

LORD AFRICA

I may not be able to stop you completely, Captain Diabolical, but I'll help Phyllis as much as I can.

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

Help Phyllis? Ha ha ha . . . you fool!

(*Lights up on Phyllis. SHE is undergoing a coughing and choking spell. SHE has great difficulty getting her breath.*)

LORD AFRICA

What have you done to her? You've made her ill, you beast.

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

Yes, she's sick. And she'll become sicker, mark my words. I'll hound all health from her bones until she dies an ignoble death in some forgotten grave. I don't like slaves who are too smart.

LORD AFRICA

You are a master of evil.

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

Yes, I am! I fully and proudly deserve any evil name that you give me. But name calling will not do you any good in saving Phyllis. You shall see.

(*Lights downs on LORD AFRICA and CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL.*)

(*PHYLLIS remains in center stage, coughing, wheezing and choking. SHE catches her breath and speaks:*)

PHYLLIS

(*Cough cough*)

. . .this sickness, this illness drains me of my strength, my very life.

(*Cough cough*)

. . .I don't see how I can go on like this in this condition. This cold land has robbed me of my health.

(*Cough cough*)

. . .I am a daughter of the sun. From Africa where the sun is hot and heavy with heat. Ohhhh . . . I fear that I won't last long in this place.

(*THE WHEATLEY FAMILY enters.*)

MARY

The ceremony was wonderful. Didn't Phyllis look splendid?

SUSANNAH

To have Phyllis baptized at such a place as Boston's Ole South Meeting House has been one of my fondest realized dreams.

JOHN WHEATLEY

Yes, my dear, it took a pretty pinch of gold, but for the prestige the price is well worth it.

(*THEY notice PHYLLIS. SHE is choking.*)

MARY

Phyllis! Your condition. It's gotten worse.

SUSANNAH

Phyllis, you look very sickly, my child. Oh, do something, John!

JOHN WHEATLEY

But I am not a doctor. That's it! We'll get a doctor for her.

MARY

Yes, Phyllis needs a doctor.

SUSANNAH

John, get a doctor!

JOHN WHEATLEY

Yes, my dear.

(*JOHN PETERS enters. HE wears the DOCTOR attire of the day, and HE is adequately polished and professional.*)

(*PHYLLIS continues to suffer. THE WHEATLEYS draw about HER in concern. THE DOCTOR approaches and examines PHYLLIS.*)

JOHN PETERS

What appears to be the patient's problem?

JOHN WHEATLEY

We don't know, doctor. We called you when all our home remedies failed.

MARY

Can you cure her, doctor?

SUSANNAH

Quiet, Mary, dear. The doctor will do all that he can.

JOHN PETERS

(*peers down Phyllis' throat*)

Hmmmmm . . .I see . . .I see.

JOHN WHEATLEY

Doctor, no expense is . . .

MARY

What do you see, doctor?

SUSANNAH

Shhh . . .John, Mary . . .the doctor knows best.

(*THE DOCTOR produces a bottle of colored liquid and a large spoon. HE pours some of the medicine into the spoon. Having seen this operation, PHYLLIS visibly controls HER coughing. As the doctor approached SHE pushes him away.*)

JOHN PETERS

Now this won't taste bad, It'll help you.

(*PHYLLIS refuses.*)

MARY

Please, Phyllis. It'll make you feel better.

SUSANNAH

Now Phyllis . . . the doctor knows best.

JOHN WHEATLEY

(*to Phyllis*)

Calm down, child. It's all for the best.

(*THE WHEATLEYS subdue PHYLLIS and JOHN PETERS pours the liquid down HER throat. After violent shuddering and gasping,*

PHYLLIS is released and HER condition miraculously improves. SHE tries to talk.)

MARY

She's going to say something!

SUSANNAH

Quiet, Mary. Listen to what she has to say.

JOHN WHEATLEY

Doctor, you are a magician.

PHYLLIS

Oh, doctor. If it wasn't for you I would have strangled and never uttered a poem again.

JOHN PETERS

Nevertheless, you are still in delicate health. You need an ocean voyage.

THE WHEATLEYS

An ocean voyage!!!

JOHN PETERS

Yes, a long one.

(*Lights Down*)

(*Lights up on LORD AFRICA and CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL on the pitching deck of a vessel at sea.*)

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

London! They're ending Phyllis Wheatley to London. What a waste of christian charity and slave-gotten gold to send a little slave girl across the ocean for her health.

LORD AFRICA

You've done all you could, Captain Diabolical, to harm Phyllis. You've kidnapped her, you've made her deathly ill and you haunt her footsteps. Haven't you done enough evil to her?

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

Have I done enough evil to her? Ho ha ha! Of course not. I am out to destroy her and all her kind completely.

LORD AFRICA

I thank God for making that impossible.

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

Well at least I do my job well. I'm not like you, Mr˙ Goody Good.

LORD AFRICA

No, you're not like me. And I am thankful I am not like you.

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

Well, be thankful all you want, Lord Africa. But I am strong, active. I do not sit around in weakness and hope that things will turn out for the good. I am out in the world working for evil. And I shall win! . . .ha ha ha . . .

LORD AFRICA

You may win for a while. But the forces of goodness will overcome you in the end. It is true; goodness is passive, even apathetic at times. But good stands for the eternal truth of life. And it has no demand to hurry through this life and change the world for the wrong.

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

You are weak and helpless, Lord Africa. And you'll not save little Phyllis.

LORD AFRICA

Perhaps I cannot save her completely, not her body form, but her spirit will be saved for it is good, evil one. You have dominion over the physical lives of men and women. But I share in the powers of the beautiful spirit world. And Phyllis' spirit is good and will be saved. Observe!

(*LORD AFRICA makes a magical gesture. The lights change and PHYLLIS is seen standing at the prow of the ship, looking ahead into the unknown.*)

PHYLLIS

What does life hold for me? What mysteries will I discover by living my life out and doing my best? For even though my body is enslaved, my spirit, mind and soul are yearning for freedom.

JOHN PETERS

(*off-stage*)

Use your mind, my dear Phyllis. Use the genius that is yours. With your intelligence you will triumph.

PHYLLIS

Oh . . .the wind makes such beautiful music in the sails of this craft that is taking me to a new destination. The song is like the voice of a dream lover that I once lost. Oh . . . if I could only have the mystery of the future presented to me now.

(*In a strange light, the form of JOHN PETERS appears. PHYLLIS is unaware of the ghostly presence, even while the apparition sings:*)

JOHN PETERS

(sings)

Over the ocean across the sea
my love for you is true and free
I'll never leave your side at least
my spirit won't
Wait for me dearest Phyllis don't
hide your love from me
Our bodies are bound to this piece
of ground called earth
our hearts cry to be free and in love
for it is the greatest treasure to
be found in this world
Over the ocean across the sea
our love travels like the breeze
but remember my queen of poetry
you must stay true and pure and
wait for me.

PHYLLIS

How suddenly sweet life feels, as if a hand has removed a weight from my heart. Now I know that everything will be wonderful. I know I'll do my best. I can almost hardly wait to meet the future. And the lover I know who waits for me.

(*PHYLLIS sings and dances:*)

PHYLLIS

(sings)

Like the sun
escaping from behind
the clouds
my heart leaps
out
bright and warm
and full

Like a leaf
blown by a
balmy breeze
my spirit
dances for joy
and my being
is bright
A hard journey ahead?
An unfortunate future?

It's all unclear
but have no fear
world
your dark child
of sweet verse
is filled
with cheer
Because
life is here
life is here
life is here
wherever you are
my love
happiness
is near

(Lights down as PHYLLIS dances off.)

(The music changes. Lights up on a formal party. The guest dance the minuet. JOHN PETERS, CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL, JOHN WHEATLEY, SUSANNAH WHEATLEY and MARY HEATLEY play the party guests.)

LORD AFRICA

(Narrates as guests dance.)

London was a triumph for our Phyllis. Her fame had preceded her. And the Countess of Huntingdon introduced her to the reform-minded society of the day, where she won new friends. Phyllis presented herself to the Lord

Mayor of London, the Earl of Dartmouth, and Benjamin Franklin, who was on official business in anticipation of the approaching American Revolution, met her and reported that:

CAPTAIN DIABOLICAL

(plays Ben Franklin)

"I went to see the black poetess and offered her any services I could do her."

THE GUEST

(intermittent replies)

Really! How wonderful! Jolly good show, old chap! Charming! How gallant! Ben, you're simply super! etc˙. .

LORD AFRICA

(presenting)

And now ladies and gentlemen of nobility and note MISS PHYLLIS WHEATLEY!

(PHYLLIS sweeps in like Diana Ross to the applause of the guests. SHE is surrounded and the object of attention.)

SUSANNAH

(plays Countess of Huntingdon)

My child you are so precious. I'm so glad you consented to visit me, the Countess of Huntingdon.

PHYLLIS

But it is my pleasure entirely, Countess.

JOHN PETERS

(plays Lord Mayor of London)

A true black pearl, or I'm not the Lord Mayor of London.

PHYLLIS

I only hope that I may prove worthy of your consideration, my Lord.

JOHN WHEATLEY

(plays Earl of Dartmouth)

Well said, well said, Lord Mayor. And even more so you, our dear Phyllis: I, the Earl of Dartmouth, am ravished by your charms and bearing. I am your faithful servant.

(THEY ALL bow and curtsy repeatedly.)

PHYLLIS

(overwhelmed)

Thank you. Thank you, one and all.

JOHN PETERS

I request a toast. A toast for Phyllis Wheatley, the first black princess of poetry!

GUESTS

TO THE BLACK PRINCESS OF POETRY!!!

(They dance the minuet. Phyllis, being the guest of honor, is danced around by each of the men. Gradually, the lights dim and PHYLLIS is left with JOHN PETERS, dancing the minuet together.)

LORD AFRICA

(enters)

Yes, Phyllis' trip was a success, but it was cut short. Susannah Wheatley, her mistress, fell ill in Boston, and Phyllis was called back to America.

(JOHN PETERS exits. The dance is over. PHYLLIS stands alone upon the stage.)

PHYLLIS

This has been a wonderful summer for me. My spirits are high. My health is better than it has been for a good while. But I must return to America. My duty calls. Yes, my duty. For even though I am a slave I have a duty of faith and loyalty to Susannah Wheatley, my mistress, my benefactress. The one who has raised me from the bottom of despair after I was stolen from my homeland. I could stay here in England, I know, if I wished to. I could declare my emancipation and refuse to return to the land of death and slavery from which I only left a short while ago. But I have a duty. A duty to another human that I cannot treat lightly. Not even for the sake of my freedom. And I have a duty to myself and all the other black people who will follow me. There is no other place I can go except home, to Boston. There's no other place for me right now. I cannot return to the shores of the hot Congo River. I no longer speak the language, and the education I have received here in the West prevents me from desiring that conclusion to my life, even if it were possible. My place is back in America; there is a revolution brewing there, and I have to be part of it; that is my place to be. I am black, I am African born, yes, but I must be an example to all future black generations that find themselves lost in the wilds of America, and I must sing in my small voice that we are Americans too -among the bravest, among the strongest, among the most worthy native sons and daughters to be found.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

(*Enters, played by Captain Diabolical.*)

Phyllis. Phyllis Wheatley. I have an assignment for you.

PHYLLIS

An assignment, Mr˙ Franklin? How can I be of service to you?

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

It is not of service to me you'll be. It is to your country.

PHYLLIS

To America? But I am merely a slave girl, Mr˙ Franklin.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

Slave or free, child . . . black or white or red . . . you are still an American. And what we patriots are fighting for is the day when each and every American man and woman and child will be fully and completely free. Do you understand?

PHYLLIS

Yes, I have dreams too.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

Then I want you to take a message to General George Washington.

PHYLLIS

To General Washington? But how . . .?

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

Do not worry about that. You will meet him one day. I know that. And when you see him, tell him . . .

(*Bends close to her and whispers the message in her ear.*)

PHYLLIS

(*puzzled*)

But how can I tell him that? How can I say that to the Father of the United States?

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

You are brilliant, Phyllis Wheatley. I know you'll find a way.

PHYLLIS

Yes, I'll find a way.

(*Lights Fade*)

LORD AFRICA

(*enters*)

And she completed her business and set sail for America. But before she left, Phyllis arranged to have her only book of poetry published.

(*Lights down. Then up on MARY WHEATLEY.*)

MARY

Phyllis! Phyllis! They're here. They're here.

PHYLLIS

(*enters*)

Quiet, Mary. Quiet, please. Your mother is deathly ill.

MARY

Oh, I'm sorry, Phyllis. But I'm so excited. Your books of poetry have just been delivered from England. How grand this day must be for you.

PHYLLIS

(*sad*)

Grand? Yes, in a way. But for us very very sad.

MARY

(*realizing*)

Sad, Phyllis? You don't mean mother?

PHYLLIS

She won't last the night.

MARY

(*crying*)

Oh, Phyllis, what are we going to do? This is the end, surely.

PHYLLIS

For Susannah, yes, this is her end on this earth. But for us, for me, we have to go on.

(*Lights dim. LORD AFRICA appears.*)

LORD AFRICA

And Phyllis did go on. She was set free and traveled to get out of the way of the fierce fighting of the American Revolution. But finally, she delivered her message to General Washington.

(*Lights up on GEORGE WASHINGTON and PHYLLIS.*)

GEORGE WASHINGTON

(*played by Captain Diabolical*)

Thank you for delivering this communication to me. You are very brave to risk so much.

PHYLLIS

I am an American, General Washington. A Revolutionary American. And if my message takes the form of poetry, it is as it has to be.

GEORGE WASHINGTON

Very well said. Thank you very much. Your new country, America is indebted to you for your great contribution, and all like you who fight for freedom, justice and equality. Though full freedom will not be realized in your lifetime or mine, we are nonetheless laying the foundations for a noble experiment that we hope will last far into the future. The experiment, my dear Phyllis Wheatley, is democracy.

(*Lights down. LORD AFRICA continues.*)

LORD AFRICA

And soon Phyllis married John Peters. Historians have somewhat besmirched this dim historical figure. But not a harsh or unflattering word has ever been found to have come from the pen of Phyllis Wheatley about the husband she truly loved and had three children by. John Peters "seems to have been a black man of dignity, who valued himself, did not bow to patronizing whites, struggled to climb the educational and economic ladder, and failed," possibly due to the limited opportunities for blacks two hundred years ago. And time passed and Phyllis Wheatley's life was over, but it will never be forgotten, and her voice will never be stilled, nor will her spirit ever again be enslaved.

(*PHYLLIS' voice come over the sound system:*)

PHYLLIS

(*v˙o˙*)

'Twas not long since I left my native shore,
The land of errors and Egyptian gloom
Father of mercy! 'Twas thy gracious hand
Brought me in safety from those dark abodes.

(*Drum beats are heard. Music rises. Lights up on PHYLLIS, laid out for her funeral. The entire COMPANY enters and parades about her. THEY sing:*)

COMPANY

This was the story
of Phyllis Wheatley
a daughter of
Africa
a child and
woman of America
Rest now
Rest now
Phyllis
you soul is
at rest
you did your
best
you rose
you triumphed
you experienced
slavery
fame
love
success
you were
first
first of a
long line
of proud black
poet voices
Black voices
singing
singing
singing
of Freedom!

(*THEY lift PHYLLIS above their heads and dance out with HER.*)

(*Lights Down*)

THE END